



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

English Literature B

LITB2

(Specification 2745)

Unit 2: Dramatic Genres

Report on the Examination

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2012 examination January series LITB2 Dramatic Genres

This is the fourth year of LITB2 and the steady progress made during the last three years has been maintained. The evidence of this January's submission is that schools and colleges have become increasingly confident in their application of the assessment criteria. One moderator commented on the innovative and challenging work that had been submitted and the evidence that students of all abilities seemed to have found much to enjoy in both texts and tasks. The quality of work produced by the best students was pleasing evidence of what can be achieved in this unit.

Quite rightly, this report will celebrate evidence of success, but there are also areas where problems continue to arise and these will also be addressed. Schools and colleges are encouraged to maintain contact with their coursework advisers and to use the autumn standardising materials to establish the standards and inform the procedures that will inform submissions in May 2012.

Assessment

The purpose of moderation is to produce fairness and parity for all students. Understandably, therefore, the marks of some schools and colleges required what were mostly minor adjustments. The most usual reason for these adjustments was that students produced work which in terms of the marks awarded by the centre matched neither the assessment criteria nor the standards suggested by the autumn standardising materials. There were also several cases where the comments on the work made by the schools and colleges bore little relation to the final mark awarded. Although some tolerance is allowed between the marks of centres and the marks of moderators, some marks need to be adjusted to do justice to those schools and colleges who have applied the criteria accurately.

Dramatic Genres and the Assessment Objectives

One of the significant ways in which all four units in this specification link together is through their approach to genre. All four units encourage the study of genre as a means of facilitating different readings of a text within a wider sense of what possibilities and perspectives a particular genre allows. At present in this unit the dramatic genre studied is tragedy. From September 2012 the genre taught will be comedy, but the basic principles behind the unit will remain the same.

Genre can be viewed as something fluid, something which evolves, something which can be significantly modified by the addition of new texts within that genre, so that this very fluidity of genre offers opportunities for interpretation and debate around different possible meanings.

Students who took the opportunity to explore the nature of dramatic genre within a wider debate about a reading of the play tended to produce more successful work than those who merely listed features of the play as a means of justifying the play as a tragedy or a character as a tragic hero. Too broad a treatment of tragedy often proved a handicap to effective argument. Tasks which invited students to defend Lear's status as a tragic hero or debate whether 'A View from the Bridge' could be justified as a tragedy in Aristotelian terms (why should it be?) either offered a self-evident argument or proved impossible to discuss in 1500 words. More effective responses, for instance, clearly focused on an aspect of tragedy, such as the

presentation and significance of death, and looked closely at such issues as the dramatic impact of the death of the tragic hero or how the idea of death operates within the wider world of the play.

The title of this unit is ‘Dramatic Genres’ and this implies that the form of drama should be the central focus of the students’ attention. The sub-genre of tragedy provides a lens through which the drama texts can be analysed. This analysis should take into account the requirements set out in the Assessment Objectives. The four Assessment Objectives are equally weighted in this unit. When students respond effectively to all of these they are developing skills which should benefit their performance in terms of the wider specification, and good tasks will allow them to do just that.

In this January submission, it was pleasing to see evidence that suggested that many schools and colleges had invested time in teaching students how to shape tightly constructed and consistently relevant arguments. It should be stressed that well-structured and coherent arguments are also significantly rewarded in externally examined papers. It was thus disappointing to note the occasions when schools and colleges seemed to have paid little or no attention to weaknesses in this area when awarding their final coursework mark. Moderators also noted several occasions when over-elaborated and convoluted expression was praised as being ‘technically fluent style’.

Many students showed an appreciation of the requirements of AO2. This may be partly due to increased familiarity with a central focus of Unit 1: the significance of form and structure within a narrative. AO2 tended to be weaker when students treated characters in a play as real people rather than literary constructs. Some character-based tasks were problematic in this respect. Unit 1 focuses on the ways authors shape their narratives. Plays also offer a narrative to be ‘read’, and it is disappointing when an understanding of narrative method is less evident in this other AS unit.

The requirement to debate meanings in texts is central to AO3. Tasks were often more successful when that debate centred on the operation of an aspect of tragedy within the wider world of the play. When students attempted simply to trace a character’s decline or describe the incidence of a theme little real debate emerged. Most schools and colleges clearly understood that in this unit the requirement to connect texts does not require direct cross-reference with other plays. Indeed, when such cross-references were made, the result was often to obfuscate the central argument and expose the shallowness of the connection. One way of illuminating readings of a play is through reference to dramatic productions. Such reference needs, however, to support a possible reading of the text rather than simply being an account of what had been seen on stage.

The first strand of AO4 also requires consideration of genre: here the literary genre of drama. Other contextual factors need to be clearly relevant to text and task. There was less evidence this January of the clumsily bolted-on gobbets of history or wildly speculative generalisations about the apparently homogeneous Elizabethan audience that have in the past impeded clear analysis of the selected text.

Texts

Moderators reported an extension in the range of texts studied for this unit. *Othello* and *Death of a Salesman* continue to make up a significant proportion of submissions, and much good work was produced on both texts. Exploration of the ways in which women were tragically silenced in *Othello* tended to produce more interesting work than the fruitless searches after Iago's 'real' motives or an exhaustive description of his tactics. *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* also continued to prove popular, but there were fewer incursions into the world of the Roman plays or the tragic-comedies than in the summer, perhaps because of the particular context of the January entry.

Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists such as Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi*), Middleton (*The Changeling*) and Kyd (*The Spanish Tragedy*) made a number of appearances. Examples of more modern tragedies studied for this January's entry included *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Translations*, *Top Girls* and *Equus*.

It must be stressed that the appropriateness of a text cannot be divorced from the accompanying task. In this context it is pleasing to see that schools and colleges are clearly continuing to make good use of their coursework advisers and the standardising materials.

Tasks

A successful task will address both parts of the unit title. The focus needs to be on the ways in which an individual play can be seen to explore an element of dramatic tragedy.

Some further general points:

- A range of tasks may assist independence of response, but there is no requirement that every student must be given a separate task. Some schools and colleges helpfully provided a list of all the tasks offered to the students.
- If task choice or creation is left to the student, it is still the responsibility of the school or college to validate the task and ensure that it is appropriate.
- There is no guarantee that a task which has worked well for one cohort of students will always be successful. Schools and colleges are encouraged to continually review their task setting.
- Tasks which appear in standardising materials are not necessarily to be seen as exemplars. Schools and colleges must make their own judgements as to whether they will suit the needs of their students.

Conventional Responses

Those tasks which focused on a particular character trait, such as Hamlet's indecisiveness often led students away from the 'playness' of the play and towards a treatment of characters as 'real' people. Equally problematic were tasks which invited students to judge what cannot be judged such as the question of whether Hamlet was 'really' mad. Such responses often gave little more than a paraphrase of a character's words as a means of defining their personality. Any sense of the form and structure of the play was lost. Some human emotions such as jealousy or pride were

merely offered as themes, and students were asked to explore their importance within the play. Frequently such responses became wholly uncoupled from any sense of tragedy (and often drama).

A crucial feature in a successful task is the opportunity it offers for debate. ‘How effectively does Shakespeare create Edmund as a tragic villain?’ invites a judgement that would seem to ask a lot of an AS student. Questions such as ‘Who is to blame for Hamlet’s tragic fall?’ essentially demand an answer to the unanswerable. ‘To what extent is *A Streetcar Named Desire* a revelation of human weakness?’ is also very difficult to judge. The formula ‘to what extent’, in fact, is not always very appropriate. ‘To what extent is jealousy a powerful force in the play?’ asks for a rather peculiar form of calculation. Another example of what is effectively a bogus debate is ‘How important is Act/Scene 3 to the play?’ Almost inevitably, such tasks led the candidate into a description of the given scene, with intermittent claims for the importance of what was described.

Tasks which offered students opportunities to consider the ways in which the dramatic structure of the play shaped the tragic experience often worked well. Looking at the tragic and dramatic significance of Shakespeare’s pairing of characters, for instance, allowed some students to open up a debate about the different ways in which those characters might be viewed. Elsewhere there were interesting debates about the degree to which Hedda Gabler emerges as a tragic figure likely to gain a modern audience’s sympathy or even empathy. Other tasks considered the degree to which a sense of tragic inevitability is presented largely through characters’ own weaknesses or through the wider forces at work within their imagined society. Such tasks offered genuine debate and often allowed students to engage individually and independently with the text. Such interaction is what the unit is significantly about.

Re-creative Responses

The re-creative option proved to be more popular than was the case a year ago. In some centres, every student submitted a re-creative response and for some this approach allowed them to explore aspects of tragedy within the text more effectively.

It must be stressed again that the re-creative approach must offer a reading of the play as a dramatic tragedy. Often it was not clear how such a reading was likely to emerge, largely because the task itself was so briefly stated. ‘Ophelia’s monologue’ or even ‘Blanche’ are not titles that give the moderator much to go on. If an extra scene is offered, it is helpful to know exactly where it is to be placed within the play.

As with a conventional response, the craft of the playwright needs to be a central focus of the student’s interest. An understanding of the playwright’s methods can emerge implicitly in the re-creative piece or explicitly in the commentary. Such an understanding is unlikely to emerge if, in the commentary, the only treatment of form, structure and language is in relation to the student’s own writing rather than in relation to the base text.

Many schools and colleges are moving beyond the dramatic monologue in their choice of form. Letters, reports, obituaries, extra scenes all provided useful ways of exploring gaps and absences within the play. Such gaps or absences must be made plausible or even possible by the base text. We know that in *A Streetcar Named*

Desire Mitch must have had an offstage conversation with his mother. We do not know that Blanche has had an abortion, as one student suggested was the case, and the play offers no support for this theory.

The commentary needs to establish a clear connection between the re-creative piece and the base text, and illustrate the significant choices that have been made in the creation of that re-creative piece. In this context, AO1 should be seen as relating to the student's own writing. AO2, especially at the higher levels, relates to the form, structure and language of the base text.

It should be emphasised that the combined length of both re-creative piece and commentary needs to be within the 1500 word limit. It should also be emphasised that centre annotation is as important in the re-creative response as in the conventional response and should not be confined to the commentary. It is also just as important to submit bibliographies as in the conventional response.

Annotation and Administration

Some important points made in earlier reports are repeated here:

Annotation

Many moderators commented on the correlation between effective centre annotation and accurate application of the assessment criteria.

- Annotation which assists the moderation process will:
- Occur throughout the two pieces of work
- Include detailed summative comments on each piece of work
- Address both strengths and weaknesses within the work. Too often students' work contained significant flaws that were nowhere acknowledged in the centre comment.
- Show awareness that the final audience for the work is the moderator and shape comments accordingly.
- Indicate the degree to which and in what ways the Assessment Objectives have been addressed. To merely identify different Assessment Objectives is of very limited value. Simply putting 'AO2' in the margin, for instance, could justify a mark of anything from 1 to 30.

Administration

The presentation of scripts matters, as does adherence to deadlines. Moderators reported many examples this January of very late, badly organised submissions. Moderators' work will be made much easier if centres:

Secure scripts with treasury tags rather than paper clips or plastic wallets. Staples tend to unfasten.

- Ensure that bibliographies, including the edition of the play, and accurate word counts are included.
- Present the folders in the sample in descending rank order.
- Arrange the two pieces in the same order as on the cover sheet (i.e. 'Shakespeare' first).

- Adhere to deadline dates. The deadline date for moderators to receive marks is always May 15th (or January 10th for the January module) or the last working date before this. This is the deadline for schools and colleges, not for students.

Word Counts

The upper word limit for this unit is 1500 words for each piece of work. With the re-creative response this applies to the combined word count of the re-creative piece and the commentary. Quotations are included in the word count. It is expected that every piece of work will be accompanied by an accurate word count.

The majority of schools and colleges had no difficulty in submitting work within these limits and the students' work benefited as a result. It was very disappointing, therefore, to note the number of assignments that were submitted this January which were well over 1500 words in length. It cannot be over-stressed that students who go over the word counts do themselves no favours whatsoever. Schools and colleges are encouraged to stress this fact to their students. Students will not be given credit for a breadth of response to a task if that breadth has only been achieved by flouting the word limits. AO1 requires a degree of structured argument. It is hard to see that work which clearly exceeds the given limits is 'well structured' within the terms of this unit.

To quote one moderator: 'An exceptionally good folder, which was rightly awarded maximum marks by the centre, had word counts of 1523 and 1518. If teachers who plead for indulgence or passively allow excessive length could read both essays they would better understand what 'well structured' means.'

Conclusion

This January provided clear evidence of the hard and effective work that is clearly being carried out by teachers and students. Feedback from standardising meetings and other contacts with schools and colleges suggested that teachers are continuing to find ways of using this unit to bring out the best in their students. Certainly, the best folders submitted this January represented a remarkable achievement for students at AS level and were to the credit of all concerned. To conclude with the words of another moderator: 'A large number of students wrote with obvious enjoyment – especially in the re-creative option but also in the conventional tasks – and produced thoughtful and thought-provoking work that was a joy to read'.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

Converting marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below:

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.